



Florida labor and political “radicalism,” 1919–1920

Wayne Flynt

To cite this article: Wayne Flynt (1968) Florida labor and political “radicalism,” 1919–1920, *Labor History*, 9:1, 73-90, DOI: [10.1080/00236566808584031](https://doi.org/10.1080/00236566808584031)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00236566808584031>



Published online: 03 Jul 2008.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 15



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

FLORIDA LABOR AND POLITICAL "RADICALISM," 1919-1920

By WAYNE FLYNT

While many scholars have discussed American labor, they generally have ignored southern unionism. A notable example is the strike and violence of 1919, and the "Red Scare" which followed immediately upon World War I. The South, dominated by anti-union conservatives, had little use for labor organizers, particularly those from the city, and even the economically liberal dirt farmer remained deeply suspicious of his urban neighbor. Despite this unfriendly environment, Florida laborers in 1919 expressed years of growing frustration in a wave of strikes and violence which paralleled the labor upheaval elsewhere in the nation.

Unionism was hardly a new phenomenon in the "Sunshine State." In the 1880s a coalition of the Knights of Labor and Negroes had won political control of Jacksonville, Florida's second largest city. Bloody transit strikes had swept Pensacola and Jacksonville into near anarchy in 1908 and in 1912, while Tampa cigar workers periodically had expressed their discontent. Frustrated in their attempt to win remedial legislation, state workers had demonstrated what most Floridians considered "radical" behavior. The necessity for white political consensus, the conservative one party Democratic structure which produced this consensus, and the lily white nature of economic protest were all challenged in turn; and just as a similar protest had branded the Populists as dangerous "radicals" in the national mind, the economic and political discontent of the early 1900s branded labor protest "radicalism." Florida union activity, too often accompanied by violence, became identified with extremism.

Floridians cast the highest percentage of Socialist votes of any southern state in the 1904, 1908, and 1912 national elections. Only in Florida did the Socialist Party finish as high as second in a presidential cam-

WAYNE FLYNT is an Associate Professor of History at Samford University and secretary for the newly-formed Association of Southern Labor Historians.

paign. Only nine states had a higher percentage of Socialist vote than Florida in 1912, and all of them except Ohio were west of the Mississippi. Florida's Socialist ballots were concentrated largely in the labor districts of the cities, particularly in Tampa, Jacksonville, and Pensacola.¹ The state's expanding urban industrial population heightened this economic tension by the end of the First World War.² Even when labor stayed within the Democratic Party, as it did in 1920, it championed candidates who lacked broadly based strength and who were publicly labeled a radical fringe based on class division and economic socialism.

To fully comprehend Florida's political climate in 1920 one must first understand the emotionalism created by the almost continuous labor upheaval which racked the state during 1919. Some 2,700 Jacksonville railroad workers walked off their jobs in August 1919, and were joined by train employees at St. Augustine, Fort Pierce, Key West, Tallahassee, Tampa, St. Petersburg, and a dozen other Florida cities.³ Many of the national strikes also touched the State. A country-wide dispute against Western Union resulted in Florida violence when company officials in Jacksonville allegedly infiltrated the union with spies and dismissed sixty-five union members.⁴ The harassed unionists threatened non-striking workers, and the company obtained a restraining injunction in June 1919. Despite the injunction, a mob of one hundred strikers and sympathizers beat a non-striker to a bloody pulp in front of the Western Union building, then hurled stones through the company's windows. City police made no attempt to disperse the mob, and Jacksonville's mayor, John W. Martin, who sympathized with the strikers, commented that conservative newspapers exaggerated the incident. The mayor later dismissed three policemen for taking money from Western Union officials, and blasted the company for offering bribes to police officers.⁵

Although national strikes stirred Florida workers, a more lasting

¹ See Wayne Flynt, "Pensacola Labor Problems and Political Radicalism, 1908," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XLIII (April, 1965). Also George Norris Green, "Florida Politics and Socialism at the Crossroads of the Progressive Era, 1912" (unpublished M. A. thesis, Florida State University, 1962).

² Florida was the first southern state to have a majority of her population in urban areas and had the highest depression era unemployment in the South. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States. Population*, III, 29; *Ibid.*, *Unemployment*, I, 235.

³ Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, August 5, 1919.

⁴ Tampa *Morning Tribune*, June 23, 1919.

⁵ Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, June 25 and July 15, 1919.

influence came from local labor clashes which spread across the State. In the Florida Keys, laborers organized a Federation of Federal Employees, while Key West law officers established the Police Loyal Union, whose membership included the city's police chief.⁶ In August 1919, electrical workers struck the city's utility facilities, while carpenters and concrete workers walked off their construction jobs. The building unions won their demand for an eight-hour day at forty cents an hour, and the electrical workers were equally successful, gaining a pay raise to \$140. a month.⁷ Key West unions even entered a candidate in the 1919 mayoralty contest, though he finished next to last.

Pete Smith, an A.F.L. organizer, expended substantial effort in 1919 to strengthen unionism in Miami. The city had emerged from the swamps and grown to 35,000 people in only twenty years. In 1919 the resort paradise was engaged in a \$2 million construction program to accommodate Miami's burgeoning tourist trade. Between 600 and 800 of the city's 2,500 union workmen walked off their jobs when non-union colored chauffeurs began delivering for local lumber yards. Businessmen, contractors, and supply dealers countered by organizing the "Greater Miami Association" in September 1919, declaring for the "open shop," and rejecting union proposals for negotiations. Nearly two hundred businessmen joined the new association and began importing non-union workers. Laborers retaliated by prosecuting two men arrested in pro-union Jacksonville for recruiting workers "without license."⁸ The unionists also threatened to boycott every member of the "Greater Miami Association." The City Council intervened to salvage the winter tourist trade, and the construction companies capitulated, agreeing to reinstate discharged workmen, dismiss non-union drivers, and pay full union wages lost by the strike.⁹

Across the peninsula, Pensacola had been swept by labor violence in 1908, resulting in the dispatch of the state militia to the city. In October 1919, engineers aboard towboats and steamers struck, tying up coastal shipping. Carpenters walked out demanding a closed shop, and were soon joined by metal workers who declared a sympathy strike.¹⁰

Jacksonville, with a long tradition of unionism, boasted thirty-eight A.F.L. locals, twenty-four of them united in the Central Trades and

⁶ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 22, 1919.

⁷ *Ibid.*, and *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, August 17, 1919.

⁸ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 26, 1919.

⁹ *Ibid.*, September 10, 1919.

¹⁰ *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, October 8 and November 25, 1919.

Labor Council. The unions' weekly paper, *The Artisan*, helped mobilize the laborers and elect John W. Martin as mayor. Unions sponsored their own circus, and their 1919 Labor Day picnic drew a crowd of 4,000 despite a downpour. Samuel Gompers recognized local labor dynamism by holding the February 1920 A.F.L. executive council meeting in Jacksonville.

In addition to trouble caused by national railroad and telephone strikes, employees of the local traction system also walked out. Two hundred workers demanded the right to organize as well as increased salaries; the company dismissed them, but the Federal War Labor Board intervened on their behalf. During the subsequent controversy, *The Artisan* waged a bellicose war of words with the conservative *Florida Times-Union*.¹¹

Unions also contested Jacksonville's prohibition against the organization of city employees. The entire one hundred man fire department walked out on June 11, 1919, when members of the union's grievance committee were fired. The anti-union city council dismissed the entire force, and local citizens angrily charged that the strike was outright treason. Numerous fights occurred between striking firemen and replacements hired by the city; in July, for example, a former fireman assaulted the vice-president of the city council. Organized labor rallied behind the firemen, and the Central Trades Council averted a city-wide sympathy strike only by allowing its constituent unions to vote for individual walkouts in support of the firemen. A petition bearing two thousand names demanded removal of three anti-union councilmen, and city unions openly opposed a council-backed municipal bond issue. Mayor Martin supported the bond drive, but told laborers he would not ask anyone opposed to it to change his vote. The bond issue passed 1,592 to 589. The mayor also held a June conference with Governor Sidney Catts about the alarming incidence of violence in city strikes. He issued a statement deploring lawlessness, and added:

Labor elected me, and any time labor wants my job you can have it. All you need to do is to pass a resolution in the central trades and labor union, saying that I am not giving satisfaction, . . . and you won't have to impeach me. I'll get out when you say.¹²

Florida laborers proudly maintained that Tampa was the state's most

¹¹ *The Artisan*, March 1, 1919; in Records of the United States Shipping Board, Record Group 32, National Archives, Washington, D. C. Hereafter cited as Record Group 32.

¹² *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 8, 1919.

progressive union city.¹³ Between thirty and forty unions thrived there, drawing their major strength from cigar and shipyard workers. Labor wielded considerable political influence, and even the business-oriented Tampa Board of Trade established a labor bureau (elected by the unions) to improve relations between workers and management.

Tampa's cigar industry undergirded its economy, producing an average one million cigars a day in one hundred factories during 1918. The industry's volatile Latin American labor force walked out in response to every grievance, whether real or imagined. In February 1919, 8,000 workers struck to protest the installation of automatic stripping machines manned by American girls. The *Latinos* returned to work, but finally won their point in November, when a number of girls were dismissed for not joining a Latin American union.

Only a month after the February shutdown, 4,000 workers walked out of twenty-two small cigar factories which refused to install electric elevators. Officials of the Central Trades and Labor Council advised arbitration and refused to support the strike when the workers rejected negotiations. Owners of the larger factories applied pressure by cutting operations in half so as to deprive the central cigar unions of strike funds. Desperate appeals for financial support went out to New York, Chicago, Key West, and Havana. The tobacco industry even threatened to remove factories from the city.¹⁴ Faced with united employer opposition, the strikers capitulated in late April 1919.

The cigar workers reorganized and in July demanded a flat twenty-five percent wage increase. When the companies rejected this proposal, 12,000 workers walked out, closing down the industry. A new era of Tampa labor-management relations began when both sides appointed committees for joint negotiations; and both, during the protracted discussions, appealed to the public with newspaper advertisements and joint debates. Workers complained of salaries averaging only thirty-six and one-half cents an hour, while management pointed to salary increases of one hundred percent since 1914. Labor held all the trumps on this occasion. Havana unions provided strike funds of \$5,000 a month, and Jacksonville cigarmakers offered fifty percent of their wages. Fur-

¹³ For an excellent summary of Tampa's Latin population and its union activity, see Durwood Long; "An Immigrant Cooperative Medicine Program in the South, 1887-1963," *The Journal of Southern History*, XXXI (November, 1965), 417-434; and "La Resistencia: Tampa's Immigrant Labor Union," *Labor History*, VI (Fall, 1965), 193-213.

¹⁴ *United States Tobacco Journal*, quoted in *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 21, 1919.

thermore, the booming Havana tobacco factories needed 10,000 skilled cigar workers, and 500 departed immediately for Cuba. Tampa owners began to crack during the first week of August when twenty-seven small factories met union demands, maintaining that the market for cigars was the greatest in years: "... this is the best opportunity we and all the cigar manufacturers of the city have had to grant a raise asked by the cigarmakers and at the same time" win orders from other cities.¹⁵ Other manufacturers offered a flat fifteen percent raise on August 16, and Tampa's workers accepted it amid tumultuous cheering. When 5,000 Key West cigar workers called a general strike demanding adoption of the new Tampa scale, they achieved a similar success.

Exhilarated by their victory, Tampa unionists turned to economic boycott in October 1919. As early as the preceding March, city unions had set up a number of cooperative stores where union members might enjoy shopping privileges by purchasing a twenty-five dollar share. The cooperatives collapsed when wholesale grocers refused to sell them merchandise, but local merchants discovered in the fall that their boycott was a two-edged sword. The Central Trade and Labor Assembly called a boycott of dry goods and shoe shops in Ybor City, a Latin suburb, to protest post-war profiteering. The Building Trades Council (representing 1,000 union members) refused to join the boycott; but merchants were denied part of the \$50,000 weekly payroll of 2,000 shipyard workers, and the \$300,000 of 12,000 cigar laborers. Though no information is available on the precise effect of the boycott, the "selective buying" campaign did bring a sharp reduction in prices by December and was discontinued.¹⁶ The success of this well organized and peaceful effort led by the cigar workers was placed in sharp relief by a bitter strike in the phosphate industry.

Earlier walkouts had contributed to a growing public fear of labor, but the final conflict which united middle-class Floridians into an anti-labor coalition occurred in Polk and Hillsborough counties, in the state's rich phosphate belt. The War Labor Board had investigated charges of labor exploitation by mining companies during World War I. The Board unanimously recommended a shorter work day and insisted upon the right of collective bargaining; a majority of the Board also proposed a wage increase to thirty-seven cents an hour. Peter O. Knight, conservative Tampa businessman and counsel for the companies, denied

¹⁵ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 7, 1919.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, November 3 and 7, December 5, 1919.

the Board's authority to interfere, and rejected the "closed shop." Mine operators protested that they provided their workers with a house at nominal rent, and supplied fuel, light, and water free. "To hear some of the flannel-mouthed, pin-headed, brainless, anarchistic, bolsheviki labor agitators talk about questions of this kind, you would think we were living in Russia."¹⁷

Apparently the miners had quickly organized, for in late April they struck the Palmetto Phosphate Company near Fort Meade when it discharged two members of the Mineral Workers' Union. On April 30, five more mines in the phosphate belt were crippled by walkouts, and the total number of strikers rose to 2,400 men. Union leaders cautioned their men to avoid violence and demanded company compliance with War Labor Board recommendations for shorter hours and better pay. The walkout spread in the next few weeks, bringing the total number of strikers to 3,500. In addition to cutting off a weekly mine payroll of \$60,000, the strike caused area railroads to lay off one hundred employees in early May.

The walkout dragged on through May with little excitement; but the operators imported a force of strike-breakers toward the end of the month. Strikers then protested to the federal mediator that returning servicemen, wearing their army uniforms, worked in the mines as "scabs." Moreover, Negro laborers were recruited from across the state—to be held in the mines against their will by company guards according to the angry strikers.¹⁸ By mid June, the mines had reopened.

The introduction of strike-breakers ignited a wave of violence which shook Florida for months. On May 30, a crowd of strikers beat a contractor who was building houses for the "scabs." A month later, Harry Mansfield, manager of the Tiger Bay Mine, was arrested for pulling a gun on a miner who refused to vacate his company house. On July 12, a striker attacked Howard Bennett, non-striking foreman of the Coronet Mine; Bennett henceforth carried a gun to work with him. Eleven days later, a shotgun blast killed J. T. Culpepper, a Negro strike-breaker, at the Nicholas mine near Lakeland. John Cochran, a white striker, was arrested for the murder.

On the night of August 7 forty-six automobiles, each containing two men armed with rifles and shotguns, drove to Haines City to escort one hundred Georgia Negroes to the phosphate mines. Just before reaching

¹⁷ "Phosphate Operator to Editor," *Ibid.*, June 1, and 29, 1919.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, June 22, 1919.

the mining town of Mulberry, the convoy was ambushed. A Negro strike-breaker was killed and deputy sheriff Gordon Zebendon was critically wounded. Another guard was shot in the arm.¹⁹ The same night, guards at the Pierce mine, apparently mistaking storekeeper J. H. Hudson for a striker, sent him to the hospital with serious injuries. Also on August 7, Rodney Wilson, an employee of the Nichols mine, died from knife wounds received while trying to separate a striker and a "scab" who were fighting.

Striking miners enjoyed sympathy and union support in Florida. When the walkout began in April, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen refused to move materials to the struck mines. The Joint Federated Shop Crafts, representing six unions of railroad mechanics at Lakeland, Tampa, and Plant City, similarly refused to handle work on any trains hauling strike-breakers or materials to the mines.²⁰ The Tampa Labor Temple opened its doors to striking miners who reported deplorable living conditions: water several inches deep under their company houses, unscreened windows, and swarms of mosquitoes. The mass union meeting condemned Tampa papers for not presenting labor's side of the strike.

R. B. Lovett, president of the Florida Federation of Labor, considered a general sympathy strike of all Florida unionists to be imminent. In September 1919, the Tampa Central Labor Council voted to aid the strikers, and Lovett decided to bring the matter of a general strike before the executive council of the State A.F.L. Adequate support for a general strike failed to materialize, and the proposal was dropped at the state convention.²¹

With the exception of organized labor, support for the miners grew slowly. Florida's conservative press lined up solidly with the mine owners, and only L. W. Bloom of the *Lakeland Star* and the *Haines City Herald* stood by the strikers. Some religious and civic leaders in Central Florida rallied to the workers' cause. When phosphate strikers held an open air rally at Plant City in July, the pastor of the First Baptist Church offered his building for the meeting in event of rain; he also attended the rally, and led the strikers in prayer. At Tampa's Hyde Park debating society, A. C. Thompson argued affirmatively on

¹⁹ Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, August 8, 1919; and *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 17, 1919, quoting *Haines City Herald*.

²⁰ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, July 22, 1919.

²¹ Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, September 29, 1919.

the issue of compulsory arbitration, emphasizing the strikers' suffering. Following the debate, his socially prominent listeners voted overwhelmingly in favor of compulsory negotiations.²³

During the summer, the phosphate strike became embroiled in state politics. Representative Samuel Williams of Polk County, where most of the mines were located, introduced a resolution in the state legislature calling for Governor Catts to investigate conditions in the mine district. Catts toured the area and sympathized with the strikers. He spoke to 2,000 Tampa unionists on July 14, and declared that eighty-six of the Florida mine owners were from out of state. Inasmuch as "the owners have defied the legislative and executive branches of the government of Florida [in refusing to negotiate with the strikers], I can declare their charters forfeited." The chief executive ripped company attorney Peter O. Knight to accompanying shouts of "You tell 'em, Guv'nor! Y-e-e-o-u! That's the stuff."²⁴

Catts further inflamed emotions by removing Polk County Sheriff John N. Logan from office. Logan had sided with the companies and alienated striking miners. In June, his chief deputy resigned because the sheriff refused to investigate claims of peonage in the mines. Then, on August 23, Catts dismissed him after conferring with the mayors of Mulberry and Fort Meade. Conservatives united behind the former law officer, and on the following day 2,500 Polk County citizens formed a Law and Order League to support Logan and the mine owners. Two days later, Dr. J. H. Willard, driving a car exactly like Logan's, was ambushed outside Bartow, Florida. Reaction to the suspension became so marked that Governor Catts was forced to reappoint Logan in November.

Catts exploded again in a Labor Day address at Pensacola. Fearing trouble, local unionists cancelled his appearance, but the fiery governor vowed to speak even if he had to swear in fifty deputies. In his speech, the governor stated that mine attorney P. O. Knight could not walk the streets of Tampa for fear of his life.²⁴

The situation in the phosphate region continued to deteriorate. Mulberry's Mayor Carter requested federal troops, and Catts instructed Florida's adjutant general to alert the state militia after someone cut the telegraph wires into Mulberry. Reports of a planned lynching

²³ Tampa *Morning Tribune*, July 2 and September 3, 1919.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, July 15, 1919.

²⁴ Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, September 12, 1919, quoting *Leesburg Commercial*.

spread when one union member was arrested for killing a prominent Polk County citizen. The Daytona National Guard Company was placed on alert, and state Adjutant-General James McCants resigned in protest of the governor's conduct during the crisis.²⁵

Strikers, angered by company intransigence, adopted sabotage terrorist tactics. On September 20, a striker emptied eight tank cars bound for the phosphate mines; the same night someone fired shots into the home of Edward Fortner, assistant general manager of the Brewster mine. Bullets ripped locomotive cabs bound for the mining area and the homes of miners, and transportation workers who entered the region were threatened.²⁶ Railroad service was discontinued until deputy United States' marshals boarded the locomotives, and the Department of Justice threatened to use military troops if necessary to protect the trains. District Judge R. M. Call of Jacksonville, noting the increasing terrorism, issued a temporary injunction on September 20 against the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers in Polk County.

Federal injunction and growing public hostility finally broke the phosphate strike. In November, Peter O. Knight announced that production was back to normal. The mines did institute a ten-hour day and raised salaries from two and one-half to three dollars a day. Several owners, however, still refused to hire any union members.²⁷ On December 18, the unions voted to end the strike and take what jobs remained.

Though a failure, the strike had demonstrated the cohesiveness of organized labor in Florida. Lasting over eight months (April 11 to December 18), the strike badly crippled Florida's phosphate industry. Production for the first quarter of 1919 (before the strike) was 70,410 tons; during the strike production sank to 13,899 tons in May, 3,828 in June, 18,450 in July, 4,986 in August. Second quarter shipments amounted to only 26,255 tons, and third quarter to 32,201.²⁸ Had strikers not alienated public opinion by violence, the outcome might have been different. Disillusioned and angry, some of the phosphate workers began to question the entire American system.

Unfortunately for Florida unionism, labor became identified in the public's mind with left-wing political activity. There was some small justification. In Tampa Frank Lehti, a shoemaker of Finnish origin, and

²⁵ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 30, 1919.

²⁶ *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, September 27, 1919.

²⁷ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, December 4, 1919.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, January 1, 1920.

John Sprunk, a local tailor, formed a socialist club. They asked to use the Tampa Labor Temple to protest the imprisonment of Eugene V. Debs and other socialists. The Temple's directors rejected the plea: "We will not lend our aid to any party or faction whose purpose is to tear down the laws of our country, or go contrary to the constitution of the American Federation of Labor."²⁹ When Lehti tried to persuade cigar workers to stage a sympathy strike for Debs, leaders of the cigar workers replied that they sympathized with Debs, but did not think a strike would help. Apparently labor's left-wing in Tampa became increasingly disenchanted, for someone began circulating copies of the Russian constitution and a proclamation of the Worker's Council of Butte, Montana, urging a general strike in support of Debs and attacking conservative labor unions for failure to do so. Lehti finally procured a hall, but was promptly arrested for uttering "disloyal statements." The *Tampa Tribune* wrote in obvious disgust: "The crowd of reds operating in this city under the guise of anarchists, bolshevists, socialists, or anything else they may call themselves, are put on notice that the first aggregation of them caught attempting to hold a Debs imprisonment protest meeting . . . is going to be awfully sorry."³⁰

"Radicals" also won a foothold in the state's booming shipyards. Spurred by lucrative government contracts, major shipyards developed at Jacksonville, Tampa, and Pensacola, drawing between 4,000 and 10,000 ship workers to each city. By late 1918, Florida yards had contracts for 435,000 tons of shipping. With the end of the war in sight, United States Senator Duncan U. Fletcher of Florida recommended the gradual curtailment of government contracts to avoid sudden unemployment and serious labor dislocation. The Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce privately predicted trouble.³¹

Morton Watkins, in March 1919, wrote Charles Piez, director general of the United States Shipping Board, summarizing the labor situation in Florida shipyards. Watkins reported that seventy-five percent of the men working at the Tampa Bay Dry Dock Company belonged to unions, that twenty-five percent of the workers at Tampa's Oscar Daniels' yard were unionized. While he found little evidence of "Bolshevism," he did warn of several trouble spots. At the Merrill-Stevens' yards in Jacksonville, the company seemed to spend more time fighting unions

²⁹ *Ibid.*, April 20, 1919.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, April 27, 1919.

³¹ Duncan U. Fletcher to Charles Piez, May 5, 1919, Record Group 32, National Archives.

than building ships. Also, a group of Industrial Workers of the World from Mobile had obtained jobs in Pensacola shipyards; a run on Pensacola banks was blamed on "two ship yard workers [presumably I. W. W. workers] who could not identify themselves . . . and . . . started stories of the Banks' insolvency." Oscar Daniels of Tampa employed his own secret service to keep an eye on shipyard labor conditions. While his police reported no leftist activity in his own yards, they convinced him that serious difficulty would soon engulf other yards: "I believe Jacksonville will require very close watching. . . . The stage seems well set for a determined attempt to unionize the yards. The Jacksonville Ship Outfitting Co. is reported ready to sign up with the unions. The labor leaders profess to see in this an opening wedge."³²

These predictions of labor unrest were fulfilled in April 1919, when 652 shipbuilders, allegedly influenced by "outsiders," walked out of the Pensacola yards. They demanded that employees "discharged without cause" be reinstated, and that their superintendent be removed.³³ The Oscar Daniels' yard at Tampa was struck in December 1919. Demanding an eight-hour day and no discrimination against union members, between 1,000 and 1,300 of the company's 2,150 employees left their jobs.

Trouble also developed in Jacksonville, whose labor force included a leftist fringe. The union newspaper advertised a weekly Socialist meeting and dealt sympathetically with the I. W. W.³⁴ When Attorney-General A. Mitchell Palmer launched a nationwide raid on January 2, 1920, to arrest alleged subversives, Jacksonville was the only southeastern city involved. Eight local residents were arrested after a raid on the home of J. A. Adams. Adams, a machinist at the Merrill-Stevens' shipyard, possessed some incriminating documents: a district charter of the Communist Labor Party, a minute book of the local Party chapter, speeches by Eugene V. Debs, "as well as several books printed in Yiddish and Russian." Abe Weisselman, a thirty-year-old Russian plumber, was arrested when he returned from a meeting at the Jacksonville labor temple; he had a membership card in the Communist Labor Party.³⁵

The Jacksonville arrests created a furor across the state, though the connection between labor and Communism was tenuous indeed. The

³² Morton Watkins to Charles Piez, March 10, 1919, Record Group 32, National Archives.

³³ Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 12, 1919.

³⁴ *The Artisan*, in Record Group 32, National Archives.

³⁵ Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, January 3 and 4, 1920.

Tampa Morning Tribune had long blamed labor clashes in the cigar industry on "about a dozen bolshevists or I. W. W.'s" who were "agitating overtime among the unsophisticated." Now the *Tribune* saw its position gloriously vindicated.³⁶ Peter O. Knight expressed the disgust of most Florida businessmen with "phrase-making, half baked theories, damn-foolism, mental joy-riding and intellectual sky-climbing. . . ." "We're going to notify Samuel Gompers and the other leaders of the American Federation of Labor," he warned, "that we are not going to continue to live under the Constitution of the American Federation of Labor. . . . We're not going to live under the red flag of Socialism."³⁷

Senator Duncan U. Fletcher was caught up in his state's reaction to the "Red Scare," and introduced a bill to deport to Guam anyone who opposed the government.³⁸ Claude L'Engle, state labor leader and a former congressman, expressed scarcely more sympathy: "Those who talk about righting wrongs, real or fancied, by violence are not the stuff from which real Americans are made and whether they are classed as Bolsheviks, Anarchists, I. W. W., or any other thing, they have no business in a country where an intelligent use of the ballot will correct all evils that come into a system built on a sound foundation of justice and equity."³⁹ But despite labor's disavowals, the public increasingly identified labor with political extremism.

Only the sensationalist public response to labor activity among the state's Negro workers equalled the reaction to Bolshevik and I.W.W. activity within Florida's labor unions. The attempt of Negroes to participate fully in Florida's labor organizations is a story that mingles frustration, racism, remarkable tolerance, and failure.

Unskilled workers in the booming resort city of St. Petersburg, most of them Negro, formed a new A.F.L. union in 1919 because of their exclusion from the regular unions. They endorsed a dollar-and-a-half daily increase in pay (to four dollars a day) and launched a series of uncoordinated wildcat strikes. Colored domestic servants formed a general housework union and demanded three dollars a day, "no matter what their employment."⁴⁰ Negro unionists, reportedly stirred by "out-

³⁶ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 21, 1919, and January 4, 1920.

³⁷ MS of Speech made by Peter O. Knight to the Southern Hardware Jobbers Association, May 12, 1921. In Peter O. Knight Papers, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida.

³⁸ U. S., *Congressional Record*, 66th Congress, 2nd Session 1919, LIX, 69.

³⁹ MS in Claude L'Engle Papers, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida.

⁴⁰ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, November 27 and September 11, 1919.

siders," talked of a general strike by all Negro laborers, and pamphlets circulated among them championing equal rights with whites. When the Negro Knights of Pythias Lodge joined a union campaign to urge colored voters to pay their poll taxes, angry white reaction brought a police investigation and warnings from the mayor of a possible Bolshevik uprising in St. Petersburg.⁴¹ Governor Catts, a Negro-baiter despite his pro-labor sympathies, dispatched an aide to a Washington, D. C., labor conference who demanded the recall of E. W. Armwood from Florida. Armwood was a Negro federal agent representing the Bureau of Negro Economics, a division of the Employment Bureau. He reportedly led his agents across the state organizing unions and "preaching social equality to the colored people, telling them not to work for less than forty cents an hour, etc."⁴² One prominent stop on Armwood's itinerary was St. Petersburg.

The refusal of white workers to join in common cause with colored laborers was again demonstrated in Florida's shipyards. A confidential report to the United States Shipping Board revealed the situation at the Oscar Daniels Yard in Tampa:

When an attempt to unionize the yard was made some time ago the negroes were urged to join the union. They made a bee line for the office to learn what the 'white folks' wanted them to do. Told that they could join if they wanted to do so, but that a union card was not needed, most of them went home. Some attended the first meeting that followed, but when they were offered a 'negro union' they refused it. They demanded equal rights, with an open door for themselves in ship yards 'up North'. . . . The whites objected, whereupon most of the negroes dropped the matter. A few accepted conditional membership, which Oscar Daniels told me he thought limited their field to Tampa, at best to Florida.⁴³

The white ship workers later paid dearly for their insistence on "Jim Crow" unions. During the April 1919, strike at the Daniels' yard only sixteen of the 600 Negro employees honored the walkout. Since colored laborers comprised forty percent of the work force, Daniels relied on his Negro nucleus until he could add new workers and break the strike.⁴⁴

Although white unionists generally reflected the racism typical of southern society, they worked closely with Negroes on at least one occasion. A key demand of the 1919 phosphate strike was a minimum

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, June 19, 1919.

⁴² *Ibid.*, April 29, 1919.

⁴³ Morton Watkins to Charles Piez, March 10, 1919, Record Group 32, National Archives.

⁴⁴ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, December 6, 1919.

thirty-seven cents an hour wage for common laborers, most of them colored. A large number of Negro miners had joined the unions and honored the strike. Company officials tried to split the racial solidarity by charging that Negro unionists had overruled their white brothers and voted the strike; then mine spokesmen changed strategy, alleging that colored union members wanted to return but feared retribution from white unionists.⁴⁵

Negro strike-breakers, to be sure, worked the phosphate mines, but they did not undermine the biracial strike front. On August 5, an anonymous caller informed Polk County's Sheriff Logan of a planned attack on the American Cynamid Company mine near Bartow. Logan then followed a car (driven by a white man), in which there were five heavily armed Negroes, to a rendezvous near the mine. At their destination, he discovered forty armed strikers, both white and black. Secretary W. Urquhart of the Mineral Worker's Union was present, ostensibly to preserve order. The Negroes present explained that they had been notified that "scabs" were running over union men and that "they must get their guns and help out." Such interracial harmony was not only unprecedented; it was dangerous. One correspondent surmised: "measures are likely to be taken at once as the arming of negroes is the last straw and trouble may result at any time."⁴⁶

When trouble did occur white residents in the phosphate mining areas sympathized with the strikers, whatever their color. On August 18, Prairie Pebble company guards fired twenty-five rounds into the town of Mulberry. A Negro infant was killed in the volley, and a Negro man and woman were critically wounded. Local officers arrested four mine guards. According to company spokesmen, a Negro named Ben Beasley trespassed on company property, fired pistol shots at the mine powerhouse, and company guards merely returned his fire. Town officials refused to hold Beasley, company spokesmen complained, and a crowd gathered and opened fire on the company's boarding house in retaliation for the earlier attack. At a subsequent coroner's inquest, the deputy who arrested Beasley testified that he was running away from the shooting when arrested, possessed no weapon, and had been "scared to death." The white jury exonerated the Negro on both trespassing and homicide charges after Mulberry's Mayor Carter testified that neither Beasley nor anyone else fired at company property. The town's

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, June 22 and July 1, 1919.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, August 5, 1919.

citizens were incensed at the company, and Governor Catts ordered mine guards to dispose of their high-powered rifles.⁴⁷

The *Tampa Morning Tribune* summarized the view of many Floridians toward labor activity among Negroes. It deplored the attempt of the "radical labor crowd" to work with the state's colored citizens, and quoted from documents found in Jacksonville's "Red Roundup":

In close connection with the unskilled workers is the problems of the negro. . . . The racial oppression of the negro is simply the expression of his economic bondage and oppression. . . . The communist party will carry on agitation among the negro workers to unite them with all class-conscious workers.⁴⁸

No charge could have caused a more emotional reaction against unions in race-conscious Florida.

It was, however, completely unfounded. There is no evidence of Negro political activity in either the Socialist or Communist camps, and election returns indicate that most colored laborers who could vote remained in the Republican fold. Despite occasional rapprochement with white workers, custom dictated that the Negro laborer "remain in his place," and that "place" precluded extensive union cooperation between races. Despite traditions of segregation, union activity among Negroes tended to give credence to charges of labor radicalism and helped fashion united opposition to the 1920 labor ticket.

The best indication of popular revulsion against labor "radicalism" came in the 1920 state elections. Florida's A.F.L. organized a Political Labor League in April 1920, endorsing Governor Sidney Catts for the United States Senate and Attorney General Van C. Swearingen for governor. The ticket appealed almost exclusively to labor and labor sympathizers. Speaking to unions throughout the state, Catts' message was the same: place men in office who "will look at this labor proposition in your way, and before placing them into office, impress upon them that the will of the workingmen is unionism and to override this will mean their expulsion from their office."⁴⁹ Addressing 2,000 Tampa workers he promised, if elected, to propose a federal commission to arbitrate disputes such as the phosphate strike. He also attacked the conservative press: "I'm tired of hearing these daily papers talk about Catts and Van Swearingen being bolshevists and anarchists. . . . They're

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, August 20, 1919.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, January 4, 1920.

⁴⁹ Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, July 17, 1919.

damned liars, and if they don't like it they can lump it."⁵⁰

To most Floridians this campaign seemed to pit class against class, thus shattering the Democratic consensus. Labor's senatorial nominee had been elected governor in 1916 by bolting the Democratic Party and running on the Prohibition ticket; now he challenged the Democratic organization on behalf of labor. Democratic gubernatorial candidate Gary A. Hardee blasted Catts, warning that "we will inevitably be plunged into the vortex of anarchy and Bolshevism. . . ."⁵¹ President Lincoln Hulley of Stetson University, a Baptist institution in central Florida, attacked Van Swearingen's labor slogan, "with the masses, against the classes;" according to Hulley, this slogan was "rank Russian bolshevism," and "unworthy [of] an American citizen."⁵² An old-line Democratic leader, Alexander St. Clair-Abrams, believed that "for years past there has been a steady drift into socialism, labor servitude, through the so-called labor unions. . . ."; the Catts-Swearingen ticket had brought Florida "to the brink of bolshevikism [sic] and socialism."⁵³ The *Jasper News* reflected small town agrarian opinion: "The people would like to know whether [the gubernatorial candidates] . . . justify organized labor in its Bolshevik attempts to overthrow the government and how they will handle strikes . . . if elected to office."⁵⁴

Of Florida's major papers, only the *Lakeland Star*, edited by pro-labor L. W. Bloom, supported Catts. The *Tampa Morning Tribune*, one of the state's most powerful papers, had endorsed Catts for Governor in 1916 and had supported most of his legislative program; but the *Tribune* of 1919 was repelled by his "labor demagoguery" and the general unrest. It chided Catts for waving "the red flag of socialism high over his head," for adopting a platform that was "down with the employer—every time, up with organized labor, right or wrong."⁵⁵ At Bradentown a non-partisan political party was organized by middle-class citizens frightened by the summer's violence. The organization expressed the fears of many Floridians:

[We are] . . . not opposed to organized labor. . . . It is true that capital organized first and oppressed labor. Now labor has organized and is oppressing the opposition. The main trouble is, we, the professional, and

⁵⁰ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, July 15, 1919.

⁵¹ *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, October 6, 1919.

⁵² Lincoln Hulley to Editor, *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 7, 1919.

⁵³ Alexander St. Clair-Abrams to Editor, *Ibid.*, November 26, 1919.

⁵⁴ *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, quoting the *Jasper News*, September 25, 1919.

⁵⁵ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, July 16, 1919.

small businessmen and farmers and our families . . . are allowing ourselves to be ground between the upper and nether millstones. A quarrel, which is none of ours, pours out its full harm on us. It is time we organize and take a hand in this matter ourselves.⁸⁶

Apparently the people of the Sunshine State agreed with this sentiment. Catts and Swearingen ran strong in areas of labor unrest, but were swamped elsewhere. Catts went down 25,000 votes to 62,300, and Swearingen fared little better, losing 30,240 to 52,600. In Hillsborough County (Tampa) Catts carried seven precincts, all of them pro-labor. But middle-class votes sent the labor ticket down to a two-to-one defeat in the county.⁸⁷ In rural Florida, the union-endorsed candidates lost five and six to one. Only in Gainsville, Miami, Jacksonville, Pensacola, Tampa, and in Polk and Washington counties did Catts run a respectable race. The defeated governor, it might be added, never won another office in Florida.

Frustrated workingmen protested that even the Boston Tea Party "would doubtless have been called the work of the I. W. W. or bolshevik" had it occurred in twentieth century Florida; an angry Tampa union member called for a new political party composed of the "A. F. of L., non-partisans, single-taxers, socialists, various farmers' unions, [and] unorganized labor. . . ."⁸⁸ Florida gave the Socialist Party a higher percentage of votes than any other southern state in the 1920 elections.

Florida's 1919 unrest laid the base for labor's strenuous political effort in 1920 and established unionism as a major force in the state's economy. Between 30,000 and 50,000 workers walked off their jobs during the year of upheaval, and considering the 1919 labor surplus, a large number of strikes were successful. The charges of violence, political unorthodoxy, Bolshevik influence, and racial iconoclasm—not uncommon southern anti-union slogans in the 1960s—unquestionably handicapped labor's political champions and compromised its public image. Considering the total impact on Florida life, 1919 seems to be the most crucial year for unionism between the initial labor organization in the 1880s and the New Deal.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, July 27, 1919.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, June 10, 1920.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, June 9 and July 19, 1919.